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SUBJECT: MOODY RIVER: WADE'S STANDING IN THE NORTH

REF: A) DAKAR 1011; B) DAKAR 0817; C) 05 DAKAR 3321

CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROY L. WHITAKER, FOR  
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

#### SUMMARY

1. (SBU) We traveled along the Senegal River Valley, from the dust-ugly but sugar-prosperous city of Richard Toll; to opposition fief Podor, which President Wade is contesting by building public works; and to a poverty-distraught Matam that is asking what Wade has done for it lately. We visited during a national teachers' strike and amid talk of new farmer militancy. Based on this trip and others to the center, east, southeast and south (Refs A and B), we conclude Wade faces severe electoral challenges in the countryside. END SUMMARY

#### SUGAR, SUGAR AND THE RIVERBOAT QUEEN

2. (SBU) The trip east from Saint Louis is a venture into ever-deepening poverty, but the disorderly and unkempt sugar-industry town of Richard Toll is an exception. It has stagnated somewhat recently, but there was a building boom in the 1980's and cane fields and the Senegalese Sugar Company still provide jobs. The Senegal River is navigable from here to Saint Louis and is unexpectedly lush and beautiful around the city's sole hotel, so for several years a circa-1950's French riverboat has been drawing European tourists seeking a taste of colonial lifestyle. (Locals gleefully recount their version of the boat's arrival in Senegal. To allow it into the river, Saint Louis' ancient trademark rotating bridge was opened for the first time in years; turning mechanisms stuck; and the island city was cut off for several embarrassed hours while an engineer was found who recalled how to fix it.)

3. (SBU) Sugar company accountant and Democratic League activist Silba Ba told us he backed Wade in 2000 but was deeply disenchanted, as were many others. Wade's local PDS (Democratic Party of Senegal) boss, Sire Fall, once led most of Richard Toll's political and labor leaders en masse to Dakar to cheer Wade at the presidential palace. Now, shadowed by Wade's unpopularity (and allegedly by failure to make certain promised political cash payments), Fall was now "in hiding." Social problems were likely in any case, whatever the 2007 election results, with the people tense and the PDS capable of violence: "If Wade loses," Ba sighed, "there will be riots, but if he does not lose it will be crisis."

#### ROTTEN TOMATOES FOR WADE -- AND ONIONS, TOO

4. (U) The River Valley road is a gallery of 200-lb onion sacks awaiting transport to Dakar, and heaps and rows of tomatoes in serial stages of spoilage and rot. There are also a few sweet potatoes and nothing else! In no other part of Senegal have we seen so little farm

produce, and towns manifest the starkest poverty: there are few soft drink stands; few people lounge about the oily-greasy truck stops chatting with friends or chance acquaintances; and no vending ladies run to your car hawking fruit. Locals have no money for such luxuries anyway; one opposition figure claimed many families are down to one meal a day, and from what we saw onion sauce figures in every meal and has become virtually a staple.

15. (C) Podor's PDS is divided into the usual factions, though their leaders represent an unusual range including a counselor to the president, the national director of ports (domaine portuaire), a tax inspector, and others. Given the reported fervor of these rivalries, the PDS Deputy Mayor, Mr. Sy, was remarkably laid back. He had had a rough week, with city schools shut down by the national teachers' strike and parents unhappy, and he seemed resigned to more difficulties. The strike was a nationwide effort to put pre-electoral pressure on the PDS, he guessed, and Wade and the PDS would be hard-pressed to repeat its 2000 win in Podor.

16. (C) Meetings with the opposition evoked tales of unmitigated social woe. Moussa Ba, Ibrahima Agne's rep, called Podor, "forsaken and neglected, without jobs, young people on the streets ... and tax revenues not enough to accomplish anything." The mayor's office was paying civil servants two or three weeks behind. Teachers are desperate," he said, "and their strike is justified, but it has paralyzed the town." Above all, there was fatalistic River Valley despair that "If you want something, you have to be with those in power." Podor had backed Wade narrowly in 2000, and nothing was better. In rainy season, river villages are isolated in

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a sea of flood and mud, and tomatoes rot because the processing plant is closed. (We heard only after our trip that Wade has begun to build two small bridges to reconnect river villages to Podor.)

17. (C) The Independent Labor Party's (PIT) Mor NDoye denounced what he called total PDS lack of interest in Podor: "the mayor lives in Thies and we never see him." When Prime Minister Macky Sall came recently, the PDS was unable to attract locals and resorted to recruiting African-Mauritanians across the river for a rally. NDoye lamented, "there is no real political life in Podor; only money counts." Democratic League's Elhadj Assane Ndingue and Thierno MBodj commented that it is not just money that trades hands, charging that "the PDS mayoralty parcels out land to allies."

18. (C) In all our conversations, we heard that local voter preferences had shifted markedly over the years, with Alliance des Forces de Progres leader Moustapha Niasse losing support, Ibrahima Agne gaining in popularity, and Socialist international lawyer and hometown favorite Aissata Tall Sall dominant overall, with admirers across the opposition coalition.

MATAM: A BRIDGE TOO FRAIL

19. (SBU) In 2002, Wade raised Saint Louis Region's eastern department to regional status with its capital at Matam, a city endowed with administrative buildings but economically moribund. Fuel tankers do not dare take rickety bridges over mud flats from highway to Matam, so it has no gas stations: a lone and long unused 1950s "Phillips 66" gas pump may evoke the curiosity of any rare tourist who ventures by error into Matam's desolation. The region's meager economic action, and garages, are in the upstart highway town of Ouro Sougi.

110. (SBU) We had a single question to pose in Matam: will voters reward Wade for making Matam a region, or

will votes reflect the region's economic misery and isolation? In a long and raucous morning session over drinks in Ouro Sougi we asked three local reporters: Senegalese Radio and Television's Daouda Niang, Sud-FM's Babacar Nolao, and RFM's Aly Bandel Niang. They framed their answer in terms of: a) a mentality of dependence, and, b) social backwardness symbolized by prejudice against the former slave class.

¶11. (C) Matamois, Daouda Niang argued, were the most conservative in Senegal. Local Islam is traditional (Ref C), but there is also the influence of the river, whose seasonal fluctuations and replenishment of the soil kept people tied to their farms. Even as agriculture and fishing have become unrewarding, out-migration from the river valley remains low. What was needed, Niang insisted, was a change in mentality, some spark of entrepreneurship as in Ouro Sougi.

¶12. Matam politics, Niang went on, had always been on a "cash or cousin" basis: you voted for a relative or you voted for pay. There was no gratitude for Wade: when Prime Minister Macky Sall came to reorganize the PDS, which has no notable local leader, police had to break up a spirited protest against him. If the PDS won this election, he insisted, it would be because villages were isolated and farmers had no access to voter registration centers. The opposition had rented vans to transport villagers to register in Matam.

¶13. (C) Reporters Nolao and Aly Niang contend Matam Region has "no positive self-identification. It's just a vast expanse of unused land. All investments here come from emigration, but it's all in houses or mosques, not anything that would produce jobs. Even well-meaning projects go terribly awry, they recounted: one semi-literate emigrant to Italy had made lots of money and built a "4-star" hotel in an isolated village of 3,000 inhabitants. Even that didn't work because the emigrant had not verified his land rights and the owners claimed the land and hotel. Normally, he could have negotiated something with the owners, but since he was from the traditional slave class, no one was willing to condescend to deal with him fairly.

¶14. (C) Responding to our key question, the journalists said Matamois had been eager to be independent of "distant and disinterested" Saint Louis, but they insisted "nothing had changed in Matam" since 2002. We doubted that until, in Matam later in the day, the PDS deputy mayor seemed to be sharing their script: "nothing has changed in Matam." The government had laid the first stone for a new road from Matam through the heart of the

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country to Dakar, but the road remained far from travel-worthy and Matamois still had to pass through Saint Louis. Even worse, he added, the region was not yet administratively free of Saint Louis: many official seals of approval still had to be obtained there.

#### WHO COUNTS? TEACHERS AND FARMERS

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¶15. (C) Aware that we were leaving for the North on the first day of what was billed as a nationwide teachers' strike, we met with Mamadou Diop Castro of the UNSAS teachers' union. Castro said the strike was the first labor action he could recall since 2000 in which every concerned union, pro-Wade and opposition alike, was taking part. By closing schools nationwide, he said, the teachers would make Wade listen to specific demands while reinforcing their power as the only opinion-makers with influence throughout the country. In both Podor and Matam, at least, we observed that the strike appeared total, with teacher union political influence confirmed.

¶16. (C) To gauge the leadership of the other social force in the countryside, we saw the leaders of the Conseil National pour la Coordination des Ruraux (CNCR). We met Cheikh Abdoul Khadre Cissokho in an upscale Indian restaurant, and he was playing a role of bumpkin to perfection, dressed in a country style gown of course cloth and earth tones, big-boned with a long-unshorn beard and a peasant's innocent smile. Luckily we had read his bio before, understood that he had a French wife, took French Senate Presidents fishing on the coast and had been National Assembly President for eight years.

¶17. (C) Although he is a Socialist, Cissokho seemed to be striving for impartiality, alternately praising and criticizing Wade's farm policies. Social protection for farmers, he argued, had to be won gradually via dialog and not confrontation: he condemned "a splinter group" that championed farmer rights in May Day celebrations. Meanwhile, the younger Mamba Gueye, Fisherman's Union leader and nominal CNCR president, sat with deep respect but clear impatience for Cissokho, and managed to slip in that farmers, herdsman and fishermen were everywhere deeply unhappy with Wade's failure to provide quality seeds, transport to market or guaranteed fair prices.

COMMENT

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¶18. (C) Wade seems doomed to lose in Podor, which is dominated by the Socialists' Aissata Tall Sall. Still, he is not conceding, and is using public works, the building of bridges, to at least cut losses. In addition, we were puzzled to hear after our trip that he had dispatched Casamance independence leader Abbe Diamacoune Senghor to Podor to praise Wade's attempts at reintegrating the war-torn region. We cannot help doubting that that will win Wade many votes in the north, though, since the River Valley sees Casamance as a very distant place indeed.

¶19. (C) Wade believes Matamois are grateful to him for transforming their isolated and poor departmental center into regional capital. He may be right, but the economic misery of the region's towns and countryside, local PDS structural weakness and dependence on buying votes, lack of any real development activity save the first steps in building a road to Dakar, and his abandonment by most of the Left will make it difficult for him.

¶20. (C) Combining what we saw in the North with what we learned earlier in the center, east, southeast and south, we conclude that Wade and the PDS have not come anywhere close to satisfying social and economic demands of farmers and small-town dwellers who deserted the Socialists in 2000 to vote for Wade. While we have not this year visited the rural northwest around Louga and Linguere, we believe that by and large the PDS will find it extremely hard to win parliamentary seats in rural areas. Despite Wade's tangible contributions, including village solar lamps and building schools, he will likewise find it hard in the presidential election to overcome rural disappointment with his performance.

JACOBS